FBI Did Not Conspire With Ray, Congressional Probers Conclude

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From The Commercial Appeal Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The House Assassinations Committee concluded publicly Tuesday it has been unable to develop any evidence to support a theory that the Federal Bureau of Investigation conspired with James Earl Ray in the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"What can be reasonably done has been done, and no evidence of that character has been found," said G. Robert Blakey, chief counsel for the committee.

The formal conclusion followed testimony Tuesday by Robert Jensen of Memphis, retired special agent in charge of the FBI's Memphis field office at King's death in 1968, and William H. Lawrence of Spruce Pine, N.C., a retired Memphis FBI agent who in 1968 was assigned to the security investigation of Dr. King and who monitored the activities of the sanitation strikers and the Invaders, a black militant group.

The committee conclusion, however, came not as a result of testimony by Jensen and Lawrence but through a committee investigation of present and former FBI agents, FBI informants and associates of Ray, King's confessed killer.

The committee said: "... All that can be said here is that the committee was not able to develop any contact between Ray and an agent or informant of the FBI, or any other evidence that would support a theory that the bureau somehow conspired with Ray himself in the assassination of Dr. King."

The committee then adjourned until Monday when it resumes its questioning into the FBI role in Dr. King's death in Memphis. On Tuesday investigators will question the Justice Department officials. And, after questioning Ray's two brothers, John and Jerry, and his sister, Carol Pepper, the committee will conclude the hearings by week's end.

Much of Tuesday's testimony dealt with the FBI's surveillance of Dr. King and whether it existed during the time King was in Memphis.

Jensen and Lawrence denied the Memphis FBI office had targeted Dr. King as part of a broad Washington-directed FBI probe of King.

Jensen insisted there was no electronic surveillance of Dr. King in Memphis, no special attempt to watch his every move. However, the FBI did receive daily reports from informants on both King and black militants, and the FBI had five known informants whose names have not been made public.

Jensen also denied having seen until Tuesday a proposed news release out of FBI headquarters in Washington, signed by former Director J. Edgar Hoover, designed to embarrass Dr. King in Memphis.

The Hoover signed memorandum proposed the FBI circulate among "friendly" news media, on a "confidential basis," the story that King was a "hypocrite" because he stayed in the white owned Holiday Inn-Rivermont, and not the black owned Lorraine Motel, following the march by sanitation workers March 28.

A part of the report from the Memphis FBI office, which Jensen said he had "obviously" sent to Washington, said King was primarily interested in his own safety following march violence.

"Interesting observation made by Memphis office in that Dr. King in his role as leader at moment of disturbance and trouble was primarily interested in preservation of himself and made no effort to quiet group that was following his leadership," said the Memphis FBI report to Washington FBI headquarters. "somewhat inconsistent with statement attributed to him during talk that the black man should support his own business establishments. Dr. King first sought residence at Sheraton Peabody and ended up staying at Rivermont Hotel, which is part of Holiday Inn chain. In past, he has stayed at the Lorraine Motel, which is a quality Negro motel."

He also was questioned extensively about whether the Memphis office investigated a possible conspiracy in King's death. The committee cited other testimony that, within 24 hours after the assassination, the FBI dropped the conspiracy theory to concentrate on a fugitive hunt.

Investigators say Ray first purchased a small-caliber rifle, and later exchanged it for the .30-06 believed to have killed Dr. King. Jensen said Ray's brother, Jerry, said he advised Ray to make the exchange.

Jensen was asked if that fact had not warranted a detailed questioning of Jerry Ray.

Jensen said he learned that Ray's two brothers, Jerry and John, were "not amenable" to interviews about the matter.

Jensen and Lawrence said neither King nor the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) had ever been put under surveillance by the FBI in Memphis.

Jensen noted the SCLC had no offices in Memphis in 1968, and that King lived in Atlanta. However, earlier testimony established that the Memphis FBI office was one of a number named by the bureau to join the counter-intelligence probe of King.

Lawrence told the committee he helped the Memphis Police Department set up its intelligence-gathering activities while he was in Memphis.

Like Jensen, he said he knew the police department's undercover agent, a black man, Merrill McCullough, whose reports went almost daily to Washington.

Lawrence said FBI informants in Memphis were "mostly patriotic" people who the FBI sometimes had to pay.

Rep. Harold Ford of Memphis, a member of the committee, declined to ask questions of Harrison. Ford left the committee room before Jensen testified and did not return.